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SUBJECT: MAIN OPPOSITION PARTY ELECTS YOUTHFUL NEW LEADER

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Ref: Zagreb 00431

¶1. (SBU) Summary and Comment. Zoran Milanovic is the new President of the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (SDP). A youthful 41 years old, this former diplomat defeated acting party president and former defense minister Zeljka Antunovic in the second round of voting by 828 to 675 votes of delegates at the extraordinary party convention held on June 2. In the wake of the recent death of SDP's first and only president Ivica Racan on 29 April, Milanovic's victory signals the party's desire for change and for a fresh face as its leader. A young, educated urbanite, Milanovic brings with him significant knowledge on NATO and EU issues, and is favorably inclined towards both institutions. Following his victory, Milanovic reached out to his SDP colleagues and election competitors, with whom he has close relations, and reconfirmed party unity in looking ahead to parliamentary elections later this year. Recent polls indicate an upswing in SDP support, and for now, Milanovic appears well-positioned in the party, the general public, and the media to capitalize on the excitement. Summary and Comment.

¶2. (U) At the convention, Milanovic handily beat Milan Bandic, the powerful Mayor of Zagreb, and Tonino Picula, Mayor of Velika Gorica and former foreign minister, who dropped out of the race in the first round earlier in the day, leaving only Milanovic and the seasoned Antunovic in the final round.

¶3. (U) Milanovic joined the SDP in 1999, much later than any of the other three aspirants to party presidency. Until 2003 he was with the Foreign Service where he rose to the position of assistant minister and focused on EU and NATO-related issues. However, he quit his job in diplomacy when his party lost elections in November 2003 to become a member of the SDP executive board, the party's operational leadership. In preparation for parliamentary elections expected in November, the SDP designated Milanovic as its campaign coordinator for District Four that extends from the town of Virovitica to the City of Osijek.

¶4. (U) As a new figure in Croatian politics, Milanovic immediately won the favor of the media and general public. There was some doubt, however, how he would do in an intra-party contest against three influential veterans. The convention on Saturday showed the party opted for changes, as if guessing what its late leader, Ivica Racan, meant in his farewell letter when he called upon the SDP "to look for new strength." As soon as elected, Milanovic said there were "no losers in the SDP" since he counted on Antunovic, Bandic and Picula to be his "closest associates." He reiterated his support for the SDP economic strategist, Ljubo Jurcic, as the party's candidate for Prime Minister. Appointment of campaign coordinators for electoral districts will be one of his immediate priorities, Milanovic said.

¶5. (U) Milanovic made his first public appearance as SDP President the next day, at the Croatian People's Party (HNS) convention where he called the HNS "a natural partner for the SDP." Later that day, Milanovic toned down his affection for the HNS, saying in a popular

TV show that, as a junior partner, the HNS could not count on getting both the prime ministerial position and the foreign ministry in a future government (as HNS leaders had earlier demanded). HNS leaders Vesna Pusic and Radimir Cacic described Milanovic's election as SDP president as a good thing both for the SDP and Croatia as a whole. President Stjepan Mesic, too, viewed the election of Milanovic as "a big opportunity for the SDP." Only the ruling HDZ called a press conference to say they did not care who the SDP president was. Its ad-hoc spokesman Gordan Jandrokovic said that "no SDP candidate has the necessary courage or ability" to defeat the HDZ at parliamentary elections. The most recent polls give the SDP a three-to-four percent lead over the ruling HDZ.

BRADTKE